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ABSTRACT

Because public schools are designed to serve the widest range of interests and are committed to the ideal of democracy, teachers cannot afford to avoid teaching works or presenting ideas that offend some members of communities. Students need to learn the value of controversy and of the challenges posed by a text. Richard Wright's "Native Son" and Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn" are valuable novels because of the problems they pose and because they are complicated and subtle texts raising troubling issues. Six skills must be applied to understand these novels: the ability (1) to recognize irony and satire; (2) to relate a text to its historical context; (3) to analyze an argument; (4) to recognize specific rhetorical strategies within a work; (5) to analyze metaphors, symbols, and other literary tropes; and (6) to analyze point of view in a narrative. Study of such literary works helps students learn to think critically, read attentively and perceptively, and make their own judgments regarding which texts best serve their interests. The teacher's main responsibility in teaching controversial texts is to help students understand what makes texts controversial and how to reach their own conclusions. (EL)

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CONTROVERSIAL TEXTS AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

What role should the general public play in determining the curriculum of public schools? Should the schools challenge or reaffirm commonly held notions? Should such controversies be avoided, or do they represent an inevitable, perhaps even a healthy consequence of public education? These questions are implicit in the recent debates over the teaching of evolution and the teaching of novels such as Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Native Son, and The Catcher in the Rye. Furthermore, such controversies have been fairly common over the past century. This, however, is not surprising, because such controversies are manifestations of several unresolved tensions in American culture: the conflict between conventional and progressive values, the conflict between common folk and so-called "experts," and more generally, the struggle for hegemony over the norms of cultural discourse. In truth, these struggles arise because we live in a pluralist democracy which maintains a system of public schools designed to serve the broadest possible range of interests. What, these controversies seem to ask, are the implications of democracy in the realm of public education? In my conclusion I will propose an explicit answer to that question. But first, I want to argue that controversies regarding school

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curricula are often salutary, and indeed, that the teaching of texts which excite controversy is, in most cases, highly desirable.

Let us begin with the example of Native Son. This brilliant novel by Richard Wright frequently comes under attack. For instance, two years ago in my own corner of Massachusetts, which is about as far from Boston as one can get without leaving the state entirely, a group of parents mounted a campaign against the use of Native Son in high school classes. They objected to the book's violence and to Bigger's unrepentant attitude. They also found Bigger's contempt for religion troubling and argued that in portraying Bigger as a victim of society, the novel undermines a sense of personal accountability for one's actions. One preacher denounced Native Son as "Godless filth"--a phrase which I take to be tautological. These parents tried to avoid appearing racist, though some of their comments--e.g., "the grammar was lousy because it was uneducated colored folks from the South"--provoked suspicion. But in general, they objected to the book on moral grounds.

I am happy to report that the local school board rejected their challenge. Nevertheless, I also believe that many of the issues which they raised were substantive issues, and these issues ought to be addressed when the book is taught. Though these parents expressed their concerns in terms of an extremely literal-minded religious dogmatism, they were right to be concerned with the ethical implications of the novel. While we are right to reject their dogmatism, we would be wrong to dismiss their ethical challenge. Indeed, serious attention to these issues can make the study of the novel a much richer experience.

No one will deny that Bigger is violent. The real question is why is he so violent. Wright takes great pains to account for this trait. Above all, he

tells us that Bigger lives in a constant state of fear. Bigger is afraid of responsibility, afraid of white people, and afraid of his own feelings--afraid, indeed, of his own fear. But he also feels a kind of nameless dread--a fear which has no object. This dread results from his frustrated desire to understand the meaning of his own existence and his desire to develop his own potential by engaging in worthwhile activity. Like the rat in the opening scene, Bigger feels trapped and desperate. He is trapped in his tenement, trapped in the Southside of Chicago, and trapped by all the circumstances of his life as a black man in America. Consequently, his violent actions are barely conscious reflexes, expressing his instinct for self-preservation.

Nevertheless, Wright does not idealize brute instinct. Indeed, Bigger's tragedy is his inability to achieve real self-consciousness until it is too late. Wright does not portray Bigger's violence in order to celebrate violence nor to titillate the reader with a pornographic transgression of taboos. Rather, his concern is to explore the social and existential meaning of this violence. Native Son is above all else a book about the movement from unreflective reaction to self-understanding. It is worse than ironic, therefore, when people attack the book as if it mindlessly depicted what it in fact strives to transcend.

Similarly, it is not true that Bigger is finally unrepentant regarding his crimes. On the contrary, he declares: "I didn't want to kill! But what I killed for, I *am*!" (391-2). What Bigger killed for was his own survival. Despite his own sense of inferiority and the prosecutor's caricature of him as a "worthless ape" and a "demented savage," Bigger knows, in his moment of crisis, that his life is worth as much as any life. His killings symbolize his own self-affirmation. This is admittedly un-Christian; but it is also a

rejection of the forces which have endeavored to dehumanize him, including the only form of Christianity which he has ever encountered. Breaking this ultimate taboo is what brings Bigger to self-consciousness. This is why he insists upon claiming responsibility for his actions. The lawyer Boris Max does blame society, but Bigger, significantly, feels that these killings, as terrible as they are, are the first deeds in his life for which he has been fully accountable. In effect, society has conspired against him so effectively as a poor black man that it allows him no meaningful options-- hence no responsibility, and hence, no manhood. Wright suggests that Bigger can only be responsible (and in this novel manhood is defined as being a conscious moral agent) by breaking the laws of the society which emasculates him. Whether we accept this formulation or not, this is the paradox which Native Son challenges us to understand.

The job of a teacher, I would argue, is to help students to meet the challenges which a text poses. In the case of Native Son this means helping students to understand the radical ways in which Richard Wright calls into question many of our commonly-held notions about morality and about social relations. Whether students ultimately accept or reject Wright's ideas is another matter; but the function of an education should be to prepare people to make informed and independent judgments. From this perspective, a dogmatic endorsement of the ideas expressed in literary "classics" is no better than a dogmatic rejection of those texts. Public controversies regarding these texts are valuable from an educational perspective insofar as they serve to highlight important issues which the texts raise. If nothing else, such controversies help to remind students that something of importance is at stake in their study of literary works--a point which may not always be self-evident.

Perhaps it is easy for me, as a teacher in an elite private liberal arts college, to be sanguine about such controversies. After all, I am not likely to be challenged by angry parents' organizations and fundamentalist ministers for what I teach at Williams College. Yet I am fully aware of the deep emotions involved in such controversies, and I sympathize with the teachers and administrators who find themselves on the firing line. Nevertheless, I believe that there is something at stake here which is of fundamental importance for all of us who are committed to the ideal of democracy, and for that reason, I believe that we cannot afford to avoid teaching works and presenting ideas which offend some members of our communities. I am tempted to say that we need our debates far more than we need peaceful, but oblivious, coexistence. Even this paradox, however, states the matter too simply. I believe that the controversies about books like Native Son and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn are not only debates about the offensive aspects of those books. Fundamentally, these debates reflect profound differences regarding the purpose of literary study, and more generally, of public education.

Let me be much more specific. In recent years most of the attacks on Huckleberry Finn have come from black parents who object to the characterization of Jim and to the frequent use of the word "nigger." I am not denying that the book's detractors are offended by their perceptions of Jim as a demeaning stereotype or by that ugly word. But usually what they really want is more than freedom from insult. They usually also want works to be taught which provide admirable portrayals of black people and accurate depictions of Afro-American culture. Similarly, the detractors of Native Son want books to be taught which present what they would regard as wholesome moral values and social attitudes. Defenders of these texts

tend to argue that the dissidents have misunderstood the works and that the works do, indeed, present valid, important, or admirable ideas and perspectives. I, personally, have written articles defending both of these works on such terms. Yet in a sense, both sides of this debate evade the real educational issue.

We don't study works of fiction because we believe that they are true, nor just because they are wholesome or pleasant or well-written. These factors are certainly important, and all too often, they seem to be the only factors. But in my opinion, the greatest value of literary education is the role it can play in teaching students how to think critically. In this regard, the crucial question in deciding whether to teach a particular text or not should be how useful the text is for developing the analytic skills of one's students, not whether it happens to be "true" or pretty or good. So from this perspective Native Son and Huckleberry Finn are valuable novels to teach precisely because of the problems which they pose, precisely because they are complicated and subtle texts which raise troubling issues. To understand them, one must be able to move beyond superficial details and emotional responses. One must think about them carefully and analytically.

To understand these novels, one must apply six particular skills: the ability (1) to recognize irony and satire; (2) to relate a text to its historical context; (3) to analyze an argument; (4) to recognize specific rhetorical strategies within a work; (5) to analyze metaphors, symbols, and other literary tropes; and (6) to analyze point of view in a narrative. Finally, as a general attitude, students must learn that literary texts are projections, not reflections, of reality. They are hypothetical constructs and not mirrors. Discussion of the structure and meaning of these constructs may teach us a great deal about the world of actual experience, but we must never confuse

the elements of fiction with external reality. The development of these basic skills and understandings is the fundamental task of all literary education. Native Son and Huckleberry Finn are by no means the only texts which can be used to teach such skills; but in my opinion, very, very few American books are comparably rewarding objects of study. And even fewer probe so profoundly the limitations of American democracy. The challenges which they pose for us as readers are the exact traits which make them indispensable to us as teachers.

The purpose of literary study is to teach students to become attentive and perceptive readers, no matter what they read. Ideally, it will also engender in them a passion for reading. But in any case, the social value of such an education in a democratic society is obvious. Democracy presupposes a literate, actively involved populace consisting of people capable of making their own independent judgments. Rather than indoctrinate students to accept certain attitudes or values or simply to appreciate approved classics, the task of a liberal education should be to enable students to think for themselves. Our job as educators is to prepare young people to become, not passive subjects, but responsible citizens.

The real issue in controversies over school curricula is usually a struggle over whose values are to be taught. When parents attack a novel, they do so because they want to have something else taught in its place: a work which promotes or at least does not attack the values and beliefs which they hold and wish to pass on to their children. Obviously, all literary works promote certain values. But in a pluralist society, the objective of literary education should be the understanding and not the promotion of ethical values. Families and churches must bear this burden, but not public schools. Furthermore, literary education should teach the skills which students need

to become perceptive readers of texts, and it should not convey the notion that certain "great books" are inherently more worth reading than other texts. Here I disagree entirely with Mr. Bennett, the current Secretary of Education, and other advocates of a narrowly defined canon. Well-educated people should be able to make their own judgments regarding which works serve their interests. Education should encourage critical understanding and the habits of tolerance and patience which the process of acquiring real understanding presupposes. Education is not adulation, and our job as teachers is not to perpetuate the mistaken notions of Mr. Bennett nor the ideological commitments of parents nor even our own unquestionable wisdom. Our job, and our sacred responsibility, is to train students to think for themselves.

We need to teach works like Native Son and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn because, in fact, there are so few works like them, and they have so much to teach us about how thoughtful writers have viewed American culture. But at the same time, we need to take public criticisms seriously. We need to teach these books more carefully, more perceptively, more sensitively; and we need to be more articulate and forthright in publicly defending our commitment to these texts. Our main responsibility, however, is to teach our students. In teaching controversial texts, we should help students to understand what makes the texts controversial. We should help them to understand that texts are the views of particular writers and that to study a view is not necessarily to endorse or espouse it. Finally, we should try to teach them well enough so that we can have faith in their ability to reach conclusions of their own.

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